

ORIGIN AND FATE OF THE BRONZE DOORS OF ABBOT DESIDERIUS OF MONTE CASSINO

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I

The bronze doors of the basilica of Monte Cassino seem to reflect cryptically the troubled history of the abbey in the last nine centuries. In their present state they consist of two dedicatory inscriptions at the bottom (each flanked by two foliate crosses), which name Maurus of Amalfi as the donor of the doors and the year 1066 as the date of their making; above these, the main expanse of the doors is covered with thirty-six panels (eighteen on either side), which contain a list of the monastery's possessions (Figs. 1-2).

The two dedicatory inscriptions of Maurus must be connected with a notice found in the first part of the *Chronica monasterii Casinensis*, which was written by Leo of Ostia, archivist and bibliothecarius of the monastery under the great Abbot Desiderius (1058-87; from 1086 on, Pope Victor III) and under his successor, Oderisius I.¹ Leo reports that when in 1065 Abbot Desiderius went to Amalfi, he so much admired the bronze portal of its cathedral, which had been made in Constantinople,² that he decided to acquire doors for his abbey church from that city. To that purpose he sent measurements of the doors of his own church. Only the dedicatory inscriptions reveal that Maurus, member of one of the leading families of Amalfi, bore the expense for the doors. An inter-

pretation of Leo's text will be given below. As the bronze doors of Amalfi that Desiderius saw still exist, it is easy to see that they have little in common with the surviving doors of Monte Cassino except, of course, for the foliate crosses. Above all, Amalfi's chief decorative element—the four central panels with silver inlaid figures of Christ and the Virgin above, and St. Andrew (to whom the cathedral is dedicated) and St. Peter below—has clearly no counterpart in Monte Cassino. According to the dedicatory inscription of the doors of Amalfi, they were a gift of Pantaleo, the son of Maurus, the donor of the doors at Monte Cassino. Another inscription, now lost, gave the name of the artist Simeon.

Of the present doors of Monte Cassino, none of the thirty-six panels above the two Maurus panels of 1066 can ever have formed part of the doors of Desiderius, because even the first four, which list possessions of Monte Cassino in the so-called Terra S. Benedicti—the area surrounding the abbey—reflect the extent of this district at least forty years after the date of the Maurus inscription.³ In fact, it is possible to demonstrate that twenty of the thirty-six panels (Fig. 2, 1-xx) owe their origins to a radical transformation of the doors by Abbot Oderisius II (1123-26). In these panels the letters have been filled with a silver alloy.⁴ Oderisius II's intervention is recorded in the *Chronicle* among events of 1123 as follows: "About this time Abbot Oderisius ordered the beautiful bronze doors at the entry of our church to be made."⁵

The other sixteen panels, slightly but consist-

¹Die Chronik von Montecassino (*Chronica monasterii Casinensis*) (hereafter *Chron. Cas.*), ed. H. Hoffmann, III.18, MGH, SS, 34 (1980), p. 385, 1-14.

²On the doors of Amalfi see H. Bloch, *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages* (hereafter *Monte Cassino*), 3 vols. (Rome-Cambridge, Mass., 1986), I, 139-41 (with references to earlier treatments) and III, figs. 58-63; on its inscriptions, I, 140 f; III, figs. 59-62. The inscription on the panel on which the Virgin is represented (p. 140) must read MHP (in one ligature) ΘV. The same holds true for the corresponding inscription on the doors of Atrani (ibid., 153).

³Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 466.

⁴Ibid., 466-87, esp. 467.

⁵Chron. Cas., IV.80, p. 544, 31: "Eo etiam tempore iam dictus abbas Oderisius portas hereas (= aereas) pulcerrimas in ingressu huius nostrae ecclesiae fieri iussit." Cf. Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 140.

ently smaller in format and with the letters unfilled, come, as I have tried to prove, from the two lateral doors that lead into the aisles of the basilica. They may be a little later in date than those of the main doors but probably belong to the time of Oderisius.⁶ The earlier theory that they might have been fashioned after the earthquake of 1349 to replace lost panels is totally unrealistic. It gives me special pleasure to record here also that it was the scholar to whom this volume is dedicated who, in discussing this problem with me, declared himself unconvinced by the "replacement" theory and suggested instead that those panels were taken from other doors of the abbey church. This suggestion led me to the simple solution that all three doors in the facade of the church were adorned with panels displaying what must have been a vast list of Monte Cassino's dependencies. Moreover, as Professor T. Julian Brown first pointed out to me, paleographically the writing on certain panels is closely related to Monte Cassino manuscripts datable around 1100.⁷

This complicated situation was further confounded by a totally unexpected discovery made in the aftermath of the bombardment of Monte Cassino in February 1944, when the monks collected the panels of the doors, which had been blasted loose during the collapse of the basilica. Eight of these bore on their backs figures of patriarchs and apostles. Of a ninth figure, found on the panel most heavily damaged in the bombardment, only the feet are preserved; his identity remains therefore unknown. The panels are inscribed as follows: Abraham, Ysa[a]c, Iaco[b], S. Thomas, S. Iacobu(s), S. Barnabas, S. Filipp(us), S. Bartholomeus. The second figure, Isaac, is referred to as the prophet Isaiah in some publications.⁸ Aside from the striking similarity in the appearance of the three "patriarchs," the reading "Ysa[a]c" is ascertained by the remnant of the C visible also in Fig. 4.

In spite of the bewildering variety of theories about the bronze doors of Desiderius, ventilated ever since the existence of the figured panels became publicly known in 1951,⁹ it was generally taken for granted that these panels once formed

⁶ Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 477–87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 477, 473 note 1.

⁸ Among them G. Matthiae, *Le porte bronzee bizantine in Italia* (Rome, 1971), fig. 10 and p. 71. Cf. on this book Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 139 note 1, 465 note 2.

⁹ M. Cagiano de Azevedo, "La porta di Desiderio a Montecassino," *BICR* 5–6 (1951), 93–97; 9–10 (1952), 32–40.

part of the doors ordered by Desiderius in Constantinople. In my own study of the bronze doors of Monte Cassino I came to the same conclusion.¹⁰ The Byzantine origin of the panels was rejected only by Margaret Frazer in her Bryn Mawr dissertation of 1968 entitled *Byzantine Bronze Doors of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries in Italy*. In her article, "Church Doors and the Gates of Paradise: Byzantine Bronze Doors in Italy," she asserted that "the nine panels with silver inlaid figures on the back of the door probably belong to a somewhat later door made at Monte Cassino."¹¹ In a recent paper the same scholar has been more specific in defining that "somewhat later door," ascribed to the initiative of Desiderius himself, and has offered arguments in support of her solution.¹² Inasmuch as she attended the Symposium on Monte Cassino at Dumbarton Oaks in 1975, where I presented a paper on "The Puzzle of the Bronze Doors of Monte Cassino: An Interdisciplinary Approach," I feel it is incumbent on me to answer her challenge of my own stand and that of many others.¹³ Although some of the following points are found in my chapter on "The Bronze Doors of Desiderius" (pp. 487–94) and elsewhere in my book, they must be restated here in their new context.

According to Frazer, "the figures [on the reverse of the eight preserved panels of the doors] are not Byzantine, but were made at Montecassino by local artists trained in the Byzantine craft of silver inlay on bronze" (p. 13). Perhaps it is best to consider one by one the proofs she offers to back up her view.

The testimony of Leo of Ostia referred to earlier must be reported here in its entirety:

He (Desiderius) saw then (scil., during a visit to Amalfi in 1065 to acquire there gifts for the rumored forthcoming visit of King Henry IV) the bronze doors of the cathedral of Amalfi. As they greatly delighted his eyes, he soon afterwards sent off to Constantinople the measurements of the doors of the old church, along with the order to make those doors *which still exist today*. For he had not yet decided to rebuild the

¹⁰ *Monte Cassino*, I, 487–94.

¹¹ *DOP* 27 (1973), 145–62; p. 155 note 40.

¹² "Abbot Desiderius' Revival of the Arts at Montecassino: Additional Evidence," *Studien zum europäischen Kunsthantwerk, Festschrift Yvonne Hackenbroch*, ed. J. Rasmussen (Munich, 1983), 11–23.

¹³ H. Bloch, "Monte Cassino. Report on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1975," *DOP* 30 (1976), 381–83. I was able to add a footnote in my book to express my disagreement with Frazer's thesis as put forth in her earlier article (cf. Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 488 note 3).

church; and that is the reason why the doors turned out to be *as short as they have remained up to the present time* [my italics].¹⁴

From this statement, clear and precise as it is, the following pertinent facts can be inferred: (1) Desiderius sent the measurements of the doors of the then-existing church ("veteris ecclesiae") to Constantinople; (2) naturally, the doors were made according to these specifications "as they are" ("ut sunt"); (3) in the meantime Desiderius had decided to rebuild the abbey church (actually the entire monastery); (4) therefore, the doors are "so short" ("sic breves"; he does *not* say "so small"),¹⁵ "as they have remained until now." So disturbed was Leo by this defect that he mentions it twice (2 and 4). Nothing permits us to fantasize that these doors were discarded. On the contrary, Leo's words make sense only if the doors were put to use *in spite of* their inadequate height. Desiderius had left the width of the opening for the doors of the new church unchanged, something that could easily be accomplished, because the widths of the new and the old church differed only slightly.¹⁶

Leo's report was written between ca. 1099 and 1105.¹⁷ Therefore, the double emphasis on the permanence of the appearance of the doors from the time of their installation (shortly after 1066) up to "now" (that is, 1099–1105) is of crucial importance: it involves a minimum of thirty years.

The careless treatment that this testimony has received requires a few remarks about the value of Leo of Ostia's account of the renewal of the monastery by Abbot Desiderius, an account that is generally regarded as one of the most priceless historical documents of this kind that have come down to us from the Middle Ages.

¹⁴ *Chron. Cas.*, III.18, p. 385, 10–14: "Videns autem tunc portas aereas episcopii Amalphitani, cum valde placuerint oculis suis, mox mensuram portarum veteris ecclesiae Constantiopolim misit ibique illas, *ut sunt*, fieri fecit. Nam nondum dispueserat ecclesiam renovare, et ob hanc causam portae ipsae *sic breves* effectae sunt, *sicut hactenus permanent*." Cf. Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 139 f.

¹⁵ Frazer, *Byzantine Bronze Doors*, 13, says that the door, when it arrived at Monte Cassino, "was too small for the new entrance way." The difference between "breves" and "parvae" (as Leo could have said if he had meant "small") is very significant, as will be seen.

¹⁶ A. Pantoni, *Le vicende della basilica di Montecassino*, Miscellanea Cassinese 36 (Monte Cassino, 1973), 67 note 12 and p. 158: width of the interior: 19.09 m, width of the facade: 21.07 m. The interior of the church of Abbot Gisulf (797–817; reconstructed after 883), which the basilica of Desiderius replaced, had a width of ca. 17 m (Pantoni, *ibid.*, 148 f.).

¹⁷ Hoffmann, *Chron. Cas.*, p. ix; Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 139 and note 1.

As Leo (born shortly before the middle of the eleventh century) entered the monastery between 1060 and 1063, a few years after Desiderius had succeeded Pope Stephen IX as abbot in 1058, he witnessed from the beginning to the end the unfolding of the grandiose project that was set into motion by Desiderius around 1066.¹⁸ His report, full of invaluable details, betokens—besides his love of art—a profound interest in what was going on¹⁹ and a thorough understanding of it.

Our knowledge that Desiderius summoned artists from Constantinople, both to execute works of art themselves and to train monks in the arts in which the Byzantines were believed to be the greatest masters of their time, is owed to Leo:²⁰

And since Roman mastery of these arts had lapsed for more than five hundred years and deserved to be revived in our time through his efforts, with the inspiration and the help of God, the abbot in his wisdom decided that a great number of young monks should be thoroughly trained in these arts, lest this knowledge be lost again in Italy. Yet he provided for himself devoted artists selected from his monks eager to become skilled not only in these arts but in all works of art that can be fashioned from gold, silver, bronze, iron, glass, ivory, wood, alabaster, and stone.

We learn from him that three square gilded silver icons to decorate the iconostasis were made by Desiderius' own monks to accompany ten other icons made in Constantinople. The magnificent golden antependium of the basilica's main altar with scenes from the New Testament and representations of the miracles of St. Benedict was ordered in Constantinople²¹ and served as the model for the antependium of the main altar of the venerable church of St. Martin (located in the Chiostro d'ingresso), originally founded by St. Benedict himself and rebuilt by Desiderius. This antependium was fashioned by Monte Cassino artists. The same is true of the bronze doors of St. Martin: "He

¹⁸ Hoffmann, *Chron. Cas.*, pp. VII–IX with earlier literature; F. Newton, "Leo Marsicanus and the Dedicatory Text and Drawing in Monte Cassino 99," *Script* 33 (1979), 181–205; R. Hüls, *Kardinäle, Klerus und Kirchen Roms 1049–1130*, Bibliothek des Deutschen Historischen Instituts 48 (Tübingen, 1977), 105 f.

¹⁹ The pertinent passages were translated by me for E. G. Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, I (Garden City, N. Y., 1957; expanded rev. of the 1st ed., 1947), 9–17. Most of these passages are reproduced in Latin and in revised translations in the chapter "The Calling of Byzantine Artists to Monte Cassino and the Construction of the Basilica," in Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 40–72; cf. also 122–24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45 f; *Chron. Cas.*, III.27, p. 396, 20–26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65–67; *Chron. Cas.*, III.32, p. 404, 2; p. 403, 17.

(Desiderius) had the bronze doors at the entry made.”²²

The examination of Leo's eyewitness report has made it clear that the doors ordered by Abbot Desiderius in Constantinople and paid for by Maurus of Amalfi were installed in the new basilica in spite of their being too short and remained in place at least until about 1100, a third of a century after their completion, and a quarter of a century after Desiderius' death. As Frazer (p. 18) expressly suggests that Desiderius himself had his artists “make a new door for his church after the model of the door he ordered from Constantinople,” it can be asserted that her thesis is manifestly refuted by Leo of Ostia's unequivocal testimony. The value of this testimony is enhanced by Leo's emphasis on the training of monks of Monte Cassino by the Byzantine artists and on the specific works that they executed for their abbot, as has been seen. Even if Leo's unusually clear statement about the fate of the original doors did not exist, is it under these circumstances debatable, let alone believable, that he would have passed over in silence a feat of such magnitude as the replacement of the doors from Constantinople by the freshly trained monks?

II

The correct interpretation of Leo of Ostia's testimony precludes altogether the hypothesis of a second set of doors ordered by Desiderius, which involves the inescapable implication that the doors from Constantinople were discarded. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to consider the other arguments adduced in favor of this proposition.

Frazer (p. 15) declines to compare the Monte Cassino figures with those of the Amalfi doors because “the door is too corroded and available photographs too indistinct” for that purpose. Instead, she uses for comparison the figure of the Virgin from the recently restored Porta di S. Clemente of St. Mark's in Venice, as it “is remarkably well preserved and therefore serves as a good comparison to the Apostles and Patriarchs at Montecassino” (p. 15).²³ The “therefore” is a curious non sequitur,

²² *Ibid.*, 68; *Chron. Cas.*, III.33, p. 408, 21–23; III.34, p. 410, 5–9; p. 408, 21: “Fecit et portas aereas in ingressu eiusdem ecclesiae.” For the church of St. Martin see A. Pantoni, *L'acropoli di Montecassino e il primitivo monastero di San Benedetto*, *Miscell. Cass.* 43 (1980), 127 f.

²³ For an illustration see Matthiae, *Porte bronze*, fig. 86; and for the Virgin of the doors of Amalfi: Frazer, “Church Doors,” fig. 3; Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, III, fig. 61.

for the figures of Monte Cassino are anything but well preserved. They must have suffered, first when the panels were reversed and inscribed between 1123 and 1126, and then again in the earthquake of 1349 and during decades of storage, and above all during the bombardment of 1944. The Virgin of the Porta di S. Clemente is shown beneath a decorated arch, and this is, in Frazer's view, “a distinctive feature of all the figures on the Byzantine doors of Italy,” except for the doors of Atrani, which she regards as Italian (p. 22 note 8).²⁴ The presumption is that one would expect a greater similarity between the figures of Monte Cassino and those of the admittedly Byzantine doors of Italy. But any student of these doors knows that there are striking differences among them, and the doors of Monte S. Angelo do not conform at all to any of the others.

The next argument is derived from the application of silver inlay to mark the face of the Virgin of the Porta di S. Clemente, and, it may be added, the faces—and not only the faces—of other figures on Byzantine doors. Frazer asserts (p. 15) that the same “technique [is] also used for Saints James, Bartholomew, Barnabas, and Thomas [Fig. 3] at Montecassino, although the haloes of the first three are also included in the same inlaid plaque. Inlaid plaques are not used for the faces of Philip, Abraham, Isaac [Fig. 4] and Jacob;²⁵ their features are simply outlined in the same fashion as their clothing.” Such lack of uniformity in the technique within a set of figures is, according to her, unparalleled and “may reflect experimentation in the use of a newly-acquired skill by local artists.” This argument, plausible as it may seem to anyone who has not studied the figures involved, turns out to be specious. What has happened to the figures

²⁴ Frazer, “Church Doors,” 149 (“It was probably made in Amalfi in imitation of its Byzantine predecessor.”) and note 12, where the only argument for her view is offered: “Misunderstood details of Pantaleone's and Sebastian's Byzantine costume indicate that this door is of local rather than Constantinopolitan manufacture.” Even if this assertion were true, it would not constitute a sufficient proof for the Italian origin of these doors. Previous scholars have regarded them as Byzantine, including E. Bertaux, *L'art d'Italie méridionale* (Paris, 1904), 407 (in spite of U. Götz, *Die Bildprogramme der Kirchentüren des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts*, Diss. [Tübingen, 1971], 200). See also Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 153; III, figs. 91–94, and add U. Schwarz, *Amalfi im frühen Mittelalter (9.–11. Jahrhundert)*, Bibliothek des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Rom 49 (1978), 67 note 327; U. Mende, *Die Bronzetüren des Mittelalters 800–1200* (Munich-Darmstadt, 1983), 43. The Latin inscriptions, especially the forms of the letters E, C, and I, point to a Byzantine origin.

²⁵ For illustrations of all eight preserved figures see Matthiae, *Porte bronze*, figs. 6–13; Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, III, figs. 150–57.

lacking the silver inlay is simply that it has disappeared under the impact of the various catastrophes to which they were subjected in the course of almost nine hundred years. In all of them (except perhaps for St. Philip; Fig. 5) the customary silver inlay is missing not only from the faces but also from the hands and feet; in the case of St. Thomas (Fig. 3) and St. Barnabas, the artist prepared the bare surface of the panel by stippling it, presumably in order to make the silver foil adhere more firmly. In the panel of Isaac (Fig. 4), which was heavily damaged in 1944, even the outlines of feet and hands are largely lost; but there can be no doubt that faces, hands, and feet of the three patriarchs were once covered with silver inlay too. St. Bartholomew and St. James are fortunately better preserved, although the former also lacks the silver inlay on his right hand (his left hand is now missing altogether). Features like eyes, noses, mouths, and hair were apparently incised into the silver inlay and disappeared in the most damaged figures together with the latter.

The failure to recognize the cause for the disappearance of silver inlay on the Monte Cassino figures is all the more difficult to understand as it is so frequent a phenomenon in the other Byzantine doors. The doors of S. Paolo fuori le Mura come to mind first because of the similarity of their fate. They were heavily damaged in the fire of 1823 that destroyed much of the basilica. On their forty-eight panels, which are adorned with figures or scenes, every face, hand, foot, or other exposed part of the human body was covered with silver inlay and looks black now, because without exception the inlay melted away in that fire.²⁶ But even in the other doors, which have been exposed only to the ravages of time (and possibly to human greed), analogous observations can be made. In the doors of Atrani the faces of all four figures have lost their silver inlay;²⁷ the same is true of the six figured panels of the doors of Salerno (Fig. 6).²⁸ The state of preservation of the figures on the Porta di S. Clemente, which consists of seven rows of panels, is particularly instructive. Of its twenty-two figures, all of which are beautifully reproduced in Guglielmo Matthiae's book, only those

²⁶ On the fire cf. Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 141. For illustrations see Matthiae, *Porte bronze*, figs. 17–28, 31–34, 36–43, 45–48, or Bloch, op. cit., III, figs. 69 f, 75, 82–84.

²⁷ Matthiae, *Porte bronze*, fig. 70; Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, III, figs. 92 f; cf. above, note 24.

²⁸ Matthiae, *Porte bronze*, figs. 74–76, 78–80; Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, III, figs. 100–103.

that cannot be reached without the help of a ladder have their silver inlaid faces intact.²⁹ The doors of the pilgrim church of Monte S. Angelo alone have survived more or less intact probably because of their sheltered location and the remoteness of that sanctuary.

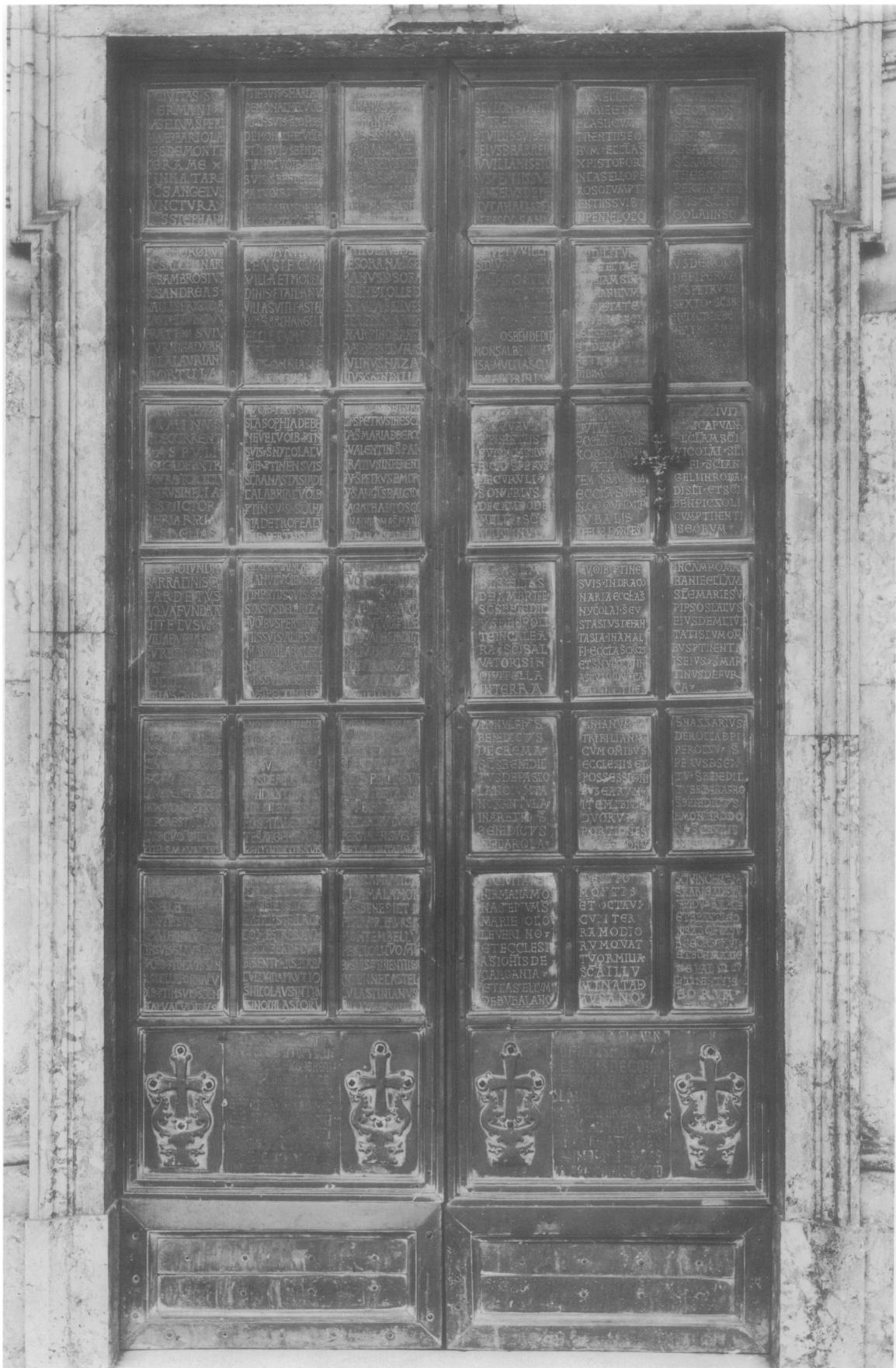
Further evidence for the Italian origin of the figures is, in Frazer's opinion, revealed by "the style of the inscriptions of the doors." While the Greek origin of the two dedicatory panels of Maurus is not under dispute, the names on the figured panels are, according to her, all "clearly written by a Latin, not a Greek, hand" (p. 17). This statement strikes someone who has studied ancient Latin inscriptions for fifty years and medieval Latin inscriptions for twenty-five as rash, to say the least.³⁰ To be sure, an artist or artisan in Constantinople commissioned to create a work for a church in Italy and expected to use the Latin language for any inscription that was desired had various ways to satisfy his client.³¹ His own native tongue was normally Greek, but the caster of the bronze doors of S. Paolo fuori le Mura, Staurakios, was a Syrian and "signed" his work in Syriac.³² The ordinary craftsman did not know Latin and was, as a matter of course, provided with his texts in that language by those who commissioned his work. Finally, it must be remembered that the Latin and Greek alphabets are similar enough to make his task not excessively difficult, even without help from anyone familiar with the Latin language. Nevertheless, telltale marks remain and are as a rule more readily detectable in elaborate inscriptions, such as the two Maurus panels, than in the often not very carefully inscribed names of figures on the Byzantine bronze doors of Italy, where one has the impression that whoever did that job followed closely the letter forms on the parchment handed to him. However, no Italian hand would have shaped an F or the first I as in Filipp(us) (Fig. 5). Even in care-

²⁹ See for the well-preserved figures, Matthiae, *Porte bronze*, figs. 84–89, 100–104; for the others, figs. 82, 90–98, 105–12.

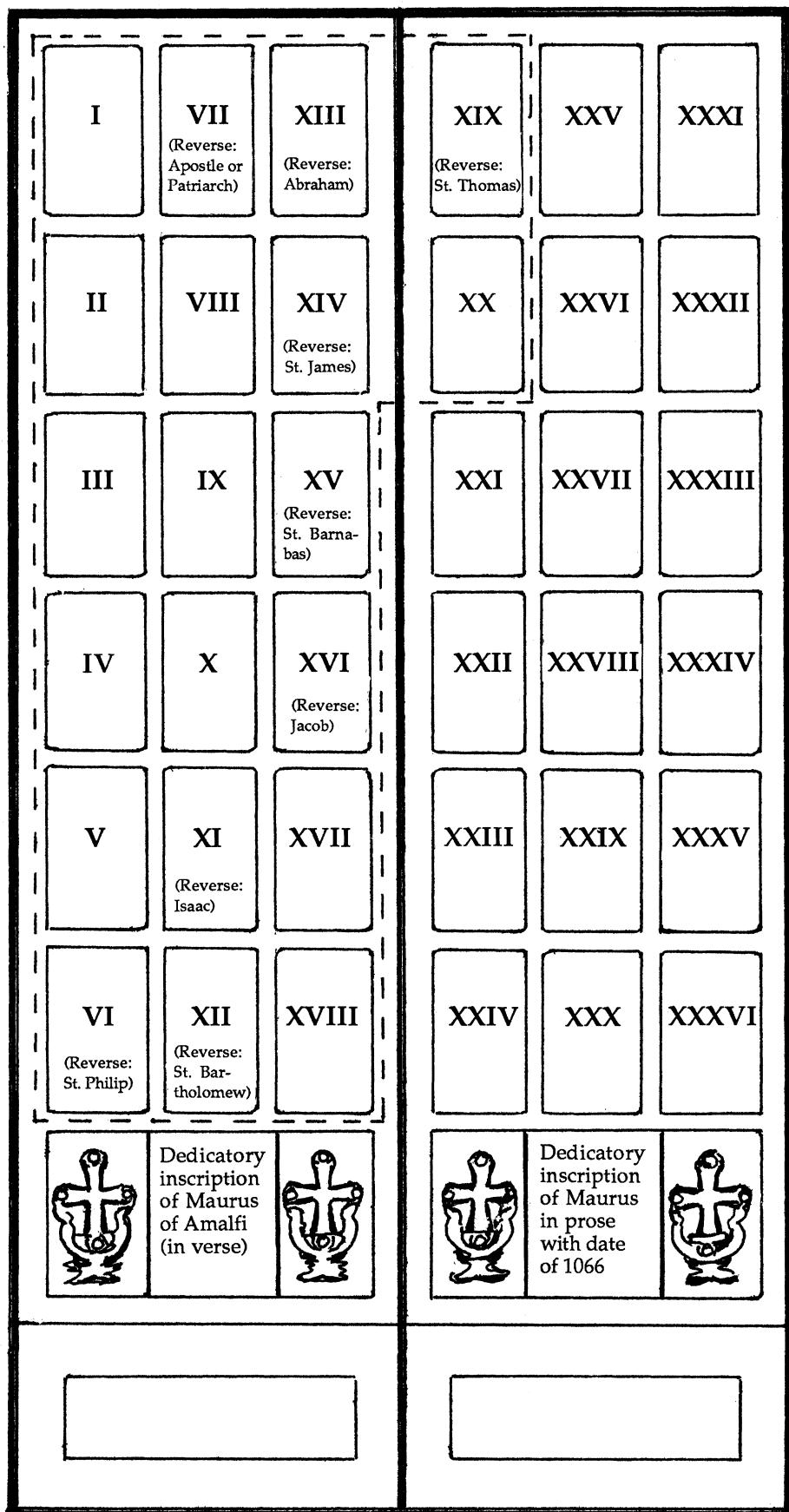
³⁰ As Frazer thanks Prof. I. Ševčenko in a footnote (20) for having "examined the inscriptions of all the Byzantine doors in Italy," it should be noted that he supported only her (undisputed) claim of the Greek origin of the Maurus dedication. When in 1985 I discussed with Ševčenko—whose expertise in Byzantine epigraphy is universally recognized—the letters of the inscriptions identifying the figures on the Monte Cassino panels, he unhesitatingly pronounced them written by a Greek hand.

³¹ It seems significant that the figures and scenes on the bronze doors of S. Paolo and the figures on the Porta di S. Clemente are identified in Greek.

³² Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 145; III, figs. 72 f.



1. Monte Cassino, main doors (before 1944) (photo: Alinari)



2. Monte Cassino, main doors, showing sequence of panels (I-XX come from the main doors of Oderisius II) (drawing: Mary Katherine Donaldson)



3. Monte Cassino, main doors, St. Thomas (reverse of panel XIX) (photo: Gabinetto Fotografico Nazionale)



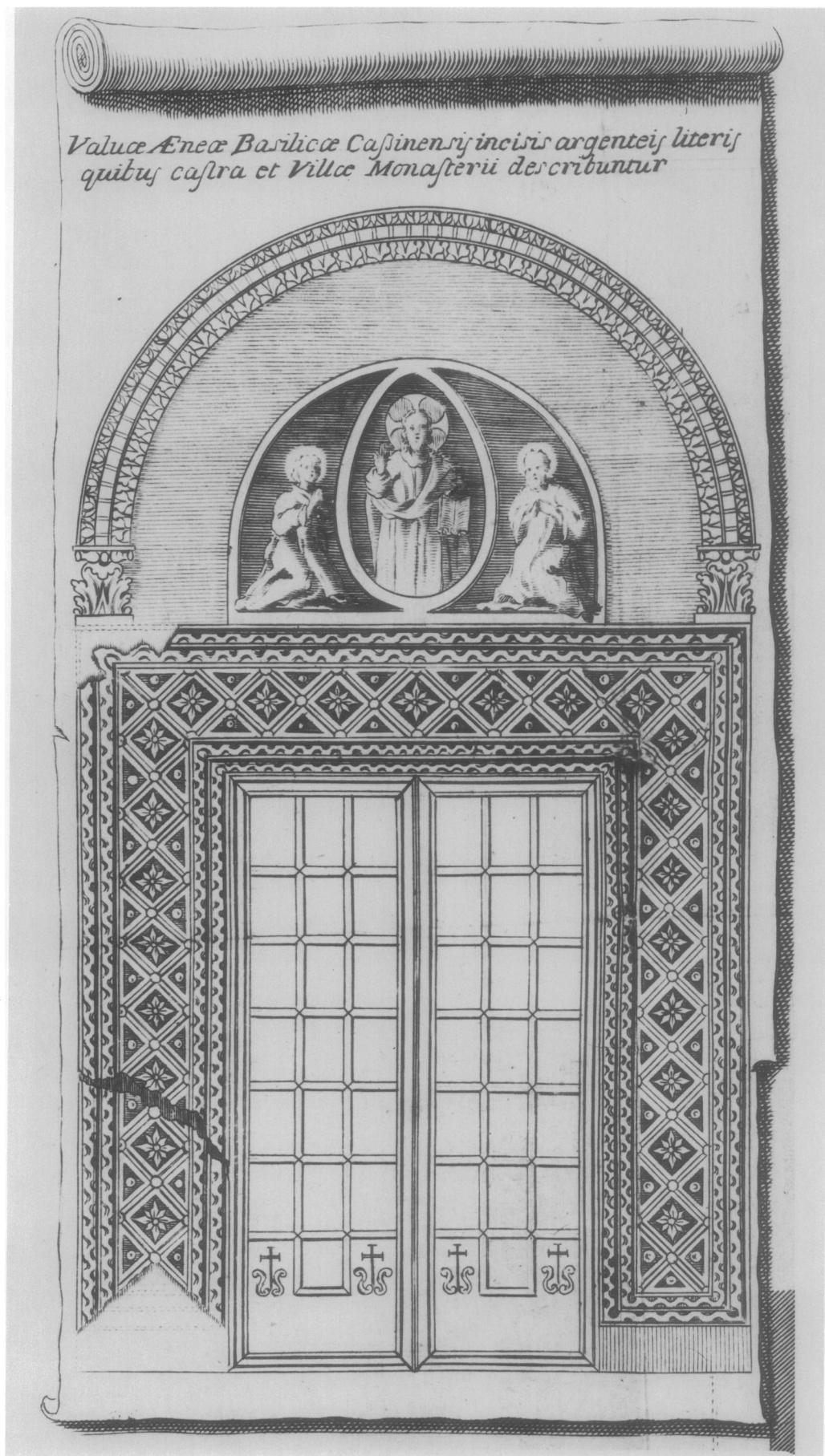
4. Monte Cassino, main doors, Isaac (reverse of panel XI) (photo: Gabinetto Fotografico Nazionale)



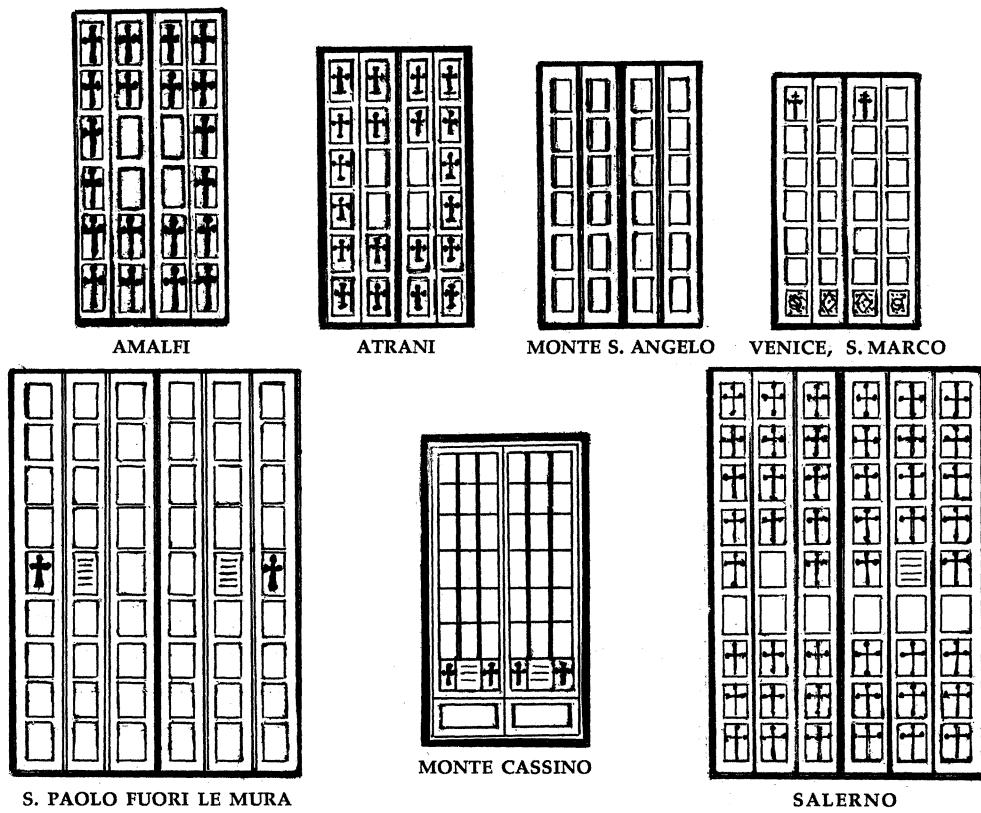
5. Monte Cassino, main doors, St. Philip (reverse of panel VI) (photo: Istituto Centrale del Restauro)



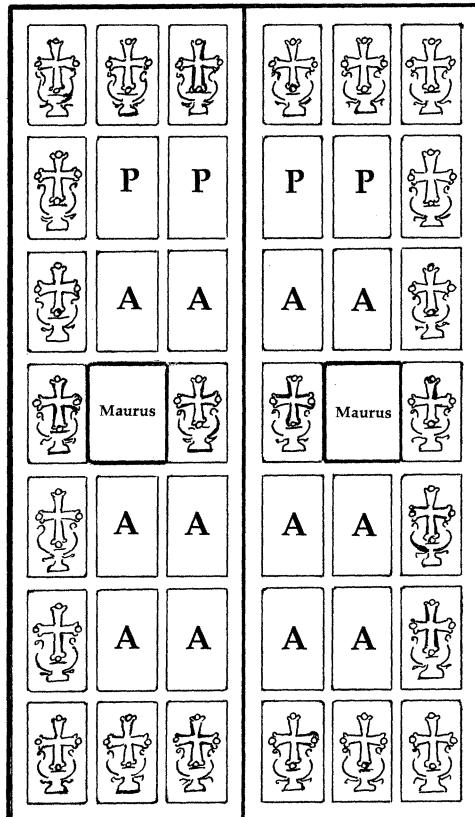
6. Salerno, cathedral, bronze doors, St. Matthew with donors (photo: Gabinetto Fotografico Nazionale)



7. Monte Cassino, main doors, according to Gattola (1712–13)



8. The Byzantine bronze doors of Italy compared with the doors of Monte Cassino (dedicatory inscriptions indicated in the lower three) (drawing: Mary Katherine Donaldson)



9. Tentative reconstruction of the bronze doors of Desiderius (P = Patriarch, A = Apostle). 3 panels with Patriarchs, 5 with Apostles, and a ninth (unidentifiable) are preserved (drawing: Mary Katherine Donaldson)

lessly written western inscriptions the horizontal stroke in the A would not normally cross the left upright stroke as it does on the figured panels of Monte Cassino. But on the whole, these inscriptions give the impression of following closely the model provided by the emissaries of Desiderius. To conclude, it would never have occurred to me to consider the probability, let alone the certainty, of an Italian origin of these inscriptions.

Frazer's final argument in favor of a Monte Cassino origin of the figured panels is the size of the Maurus panels; they are ca. 10 cm wider than the Oderisian panels above them. "No such variation in size on one door exists among Byzantine or Italian eleventh-century doors" (p. 17). This sounds as if there were dozens of such doors surviving. Desiderius was struck by the Amalfi doors precisely because he had never before seen doors like them. What compels us to assume that he ordered some sort of duplicate of the Amalfi doors, anticipating, as it were, what Pantaleo Viarecto actually did twenty years later, when he commissioned in Constantinople the doors of Atrani, which, indeed, are almost identical in design to those of Amalfi? If the "renovatio" of the basilica of Monte Cassino tells us one thing, it is that Desiderius and his advisers were men of imagination, who would take advantage of the superior craftsmanship of Byzantine artists and of works of Roman or Early Christian art "not to be copied slavishly but to be used as sources of inspiration."³³

Thus, compared with the hieratic poses of the figures of the doors of S. Paolo fuori le Mura or of the Porta di S. Clemente (both of which, it will be remembered [cf. note 31], have each figure or scene identified by Greek inscriptions), the patriarchs and apostles of Monte Cassino show a classical flair;³⁴ but so do the figures of the doors of the cathedral of Salerno, most impressively that of the titular saint, St. Matthew, who is represented with the two donors of the doors (Fig. 6).³⁵ A comparison with the St. Philip of Monte Cassino (Fig. 5) will help to make this relationship more obvious.

III

There remains one problem that has never been tackled before, because it may have seemed insolvable: how Desiderius managed to install the doors from Constantinople in spite of the fact that they were too short. That a probable answer to this

³³ Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 89; cf. *ibid.*, 88–93 and E. Kitzinger's two articles of 1972 extensively quoted there.

question can be given at all is due to our knowledge of the dimensions of the opening for these doors, a knowledge curiously neglected by art historians. The magnificent frame of the doors survived up to the time of Erasmo Gattola almost intact. It was later changed in that both the architrave and the jambs were turned inside the doorway, the former to serve as soffit. To achieve this the surface of both ends of the architrave was chiseled off.³⁶ The frame, heavily damaged in the bombardment, has been reconstructed in the museum of Monte Cassino, a most impressive sight even in its fragmentary state.³⁷ The height and the width of the doors' opening (3.37 m and 1.72 m, respectively) have never changed.

Let us assume that the dedicatory inscriptions of Maurus were in the center of the original doors (rather than at the bottom); would not the simplest way out of the dilemma have been to create two nondecorated panels, which would have filled the gap?

Oderisius II could have had a chance to remedy this situation by simply adding another row of four inscribed panels. But he was confined by both the fixed dimensions of the door opening and by the size of the panels of the Desiderian doors which he reused. The adjustments required for this solution would have been substantial, the more so as he felt obliged to keep the Maurus panels in his new doors. Moreover, the addition of four more panels to these doors would have upset his plans for the continuation of the list on the two lateral doors. One can, therefore, conjecture that Oderisius II did not essentially change the basic structure of the doors.

There is no reason to believe that the doors were tampered with again until they were damaged in the earthquake of 1349. The damage can not have been very great, insofar as the surviving panels are

³⁴ Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 489 f.

³⁵ Bloch, *ibid.*, 154 f; III, figs. 98–105.

³⁶ Respectively, 44 cm and 50 cm; Pantoni, *Vicende*, 169, figs. 87 f (after the bombardment), Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 72 f; III, figs. 16 f (these illustrations represent the arrangement in existence before the bombardment). For an evaluation of the frame as the principal surviving document of classical influence on the Desiderian "renovatio" of the basilica cf. H. Bloch, "The New Fascination with Ancient Rome," *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. R. L. Benson and G. Constable (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 615–36; p. 620.

³⁷ The original length of the architrave was 3.15 m, its height 80 cm, its thickness 22 cm. One of the jambs is now preserved to a height of 3.3 m (almost its original height); cf. Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 482, after Pantoni, *Vicende*, 166, 169. For illustrations of the jambs in their present state cf. Pantoni, *ibid.*, figs. 86, 94, 96.

concerned, as is proved by their excellent state of preservation until 1944.

In any case, in March 1535, about a hundred and fifty years after the reconstruction of the doors in connection with the rebuilding of the abbey, an official copy of the then-existing panels was drawn up at the order of the prior of Monte Cassino, Benedetto Canofilo of Castel di Sangro.³⁸ The 36 + 2 inscribed panels of that date were identical with those that survive today, even if their arrangement differed from the present one. The current arrangement goes back to 1716, when the doors were completely dismantled, presumably under Gattola's supervision. The doors' appearance then was the same as it is now, with the blank base panels at the bottom (Fig. 7).³⁹ There is no reason to believe that it was any different in 1535.

The drawing (Fig. 8), so skillfully prepared by Mary Katherine Donaldson, shows the doors of Monte Cassino, as they have looked since at least 1535, compared with the Byzantine bronze doors of southern Italy, all of which are represented approximately in scale.⁴⁰ It is not difficult to draw two conclusions: the other doors have one feature in common in which they differ radically from the doors of Monte Cassino—their surface is covered top to bottom with decorated panels, whereas the Monte Cassino doors alone have two seemingly irrational blank base panels. An unprejudiced and uninformed observer would gain the impression that the actual doors rest upon a sort of "pedestal" formed by those two base panels. In other words: within the frame of the Desiderian doors—which, though damaged, has survived the bombardment of 1944—the doors themselves are even now, in Leo of Ostia's words, "sic breves." It may, then, be concluded that the otherwise senseless base panels constitute, in all probability, the solution chosen by Desiderius in his dilemma about those doors, which he wished to use but could not without some adaptation. A simpler and at the same time more

³⁸This document, crucial for the history of the doors, is published in Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 484–87.

³⁹The etching appeared in E. Gattola, *Historia Abbatiae Cassinensis* (Venice, 1733), I, pl. 1 = Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, III, fig. 15a. The artist by an oversight failed to demarcate the two base panels. A detailed description of these panels, as they appeared early in this century, is found in Thomas J. Preston, Jr., *The Bronze Doors of the Abbey of Monte Cassino and of Saint Paul's, Rome* (Princeton, 1915), 15 f.

⁴⁰At the same time that I express my warm thanks to Kay Donaldson for her valuable drawings for this article, let me add that she asked me to convey her wish that these drawings be considered as her contribution to the scholar to whom the volume is dedicated.

practical solution can hardly be imagined. How ingenious it was, as a way out of a serious difficulty, can be gathered from the fact that, to my knowledge, no one has ever commented on the uniqueness of this feature, a uniqueness that is enhanced when the following nine Italian church doors of the twelfth century are added to the six Byzantine doors in Italy, all of which show the conventional pattern of panels: the Porta Maggiore of St. Mark's in Venice;⁴¹ three doors of Oderisius of Benevento: the main doors of the cathedral of Troia of 1119, the west portal of the same church of 1127, and the doors of the convent church of S. Giovanni delle Monache in Capua of 1122;⁴² the three doors of Barisanus of Trani in Ravello, Trani, and Monreale (1179–90);⁴³ the doors of the abbey church of S. Clemente a Casauria (1182–89);⁴⁴ and the doors of the cathedral of Benevento (early thirteenth century).⁴⁵

A more thorough investigation of the origin of the figured panels of the bronze doors of Monte Cassino not only results in a confirmation of the view, generally held since their discovery, that they adorned the doors ordered by Abbot Desiderius in Constantinople, but it unexpectedly offers also a more than likely explanation of Leo of Ostia's words about the doors which were "too short" and yet were installed and of how this obstacle was overcome. Moreover, it shows how much the Amalfi doors served as a model for Desiderius and how much more grandiose his doors must have been.

APPENDIX

A Tentative Reconstruction of the Bronze Doors of Desiderius

No information exists about the restoration of the doors of Monte Cassino after the earthquake of 1349. By 1535 they consisted, as noted above, of the same elements of which they are composed now. It defies probability that the surviving panels of the list of possessions amounted to exactly the needed thirty-six. What may have happened was that during the earthquake the panels of all three

⁴¹Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 165 f; III, fig. 115; Frazer, *DOP* 27 (1973), fig. 11; Matthiae, *Porte bronzee*, fig. 113.

⁴²Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, III, figs. 167, 187, 161.

⁴³Mende, *Bronzetüren*, figs. 137, 156, 161.

⁴⁴Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, III, fig. 212.

⁴⁵Bloch, *ibid.*, III, figs. 246–50; Mende, *Bronzetüren*, fig. 209.

doors were shaken loose and that many were lost then in the rubble; those that were salvaged may have suffered further losses during decades of storage. Finally, when the present doors were assembled, panels from all three doors were intermingled with little regard for which ones belonged together; it is most likely that the excess panels then still in existence either were discarded immediately or have disappeared in the course of time.⁴⁶

As for the doors of Oderisius II, it can be established that the list has three demonstrable gaps; that is, a minimum of four panels—an even number is necessary—is missing. As the patriarchs and apostles together amounted to at least sixteen—and there is no reason not to assume that all of these were reemployed—seven panels (16 minus the 9 extant) are missing, which means that the minimum of missing panels must be raised from four to eight.⁴⁷

For the side doors the minimum number of inscribed panels for each of the two portals can be calculated to have been twelve (cf. note 47).

⁴⁶Cf. Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, 479–83.

⁴⁷This in correction of *Monte Cassino*, II, 1110, Add. to p. 482.

If it could be conjectured that the number of panels in the present doors corresponds to that of the doors from Constantinople, a surprisingly simple reconstruction of those doors could be proposed (Fig. 9). One could assume that the two Maurus panels were in the middle, each flanked by foliate crosses on both sides (like the inscription of the doors of Salerno)⁴⁸ or—less probably—only on the outer side (like the two dedicatory inscriptions of the doors of S. Paolo).⁴⁹ The doors would be bordered all around by panels with foliate crosses (22 altogether); inside, the top row would consist of four panels of patriarchs, followed by a row of panels with four apostles, then the row with the Maurus inscriptions, and the two lower rows of panels with the remaining eight apostles. This hypothetical reconstruction would contain exactly the same number of panels as the present doors, as they have presumably existed since the end of the fourteenth century.

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⁴⁸As marked in Fig. 8. Cf. Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, III, figs. 99, 97, 105.

⁴⁹As marked in Fig. 8. Cf. Bloch, *ibid.*, figs. 66–68, 71.